

Learning to last a lifetime

Literacy centers aim to improve adults' work and family skills

By DANIELLE PANUSH
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, a tiny neighborhood police station on Kulshan Avenue turns into a classroom for neighborhood residents.

Young adults, most of whom are recent immigrants from Mexico, gather around tables in front of dry-erase boards and settle in for an hour or more of English language tutoring.

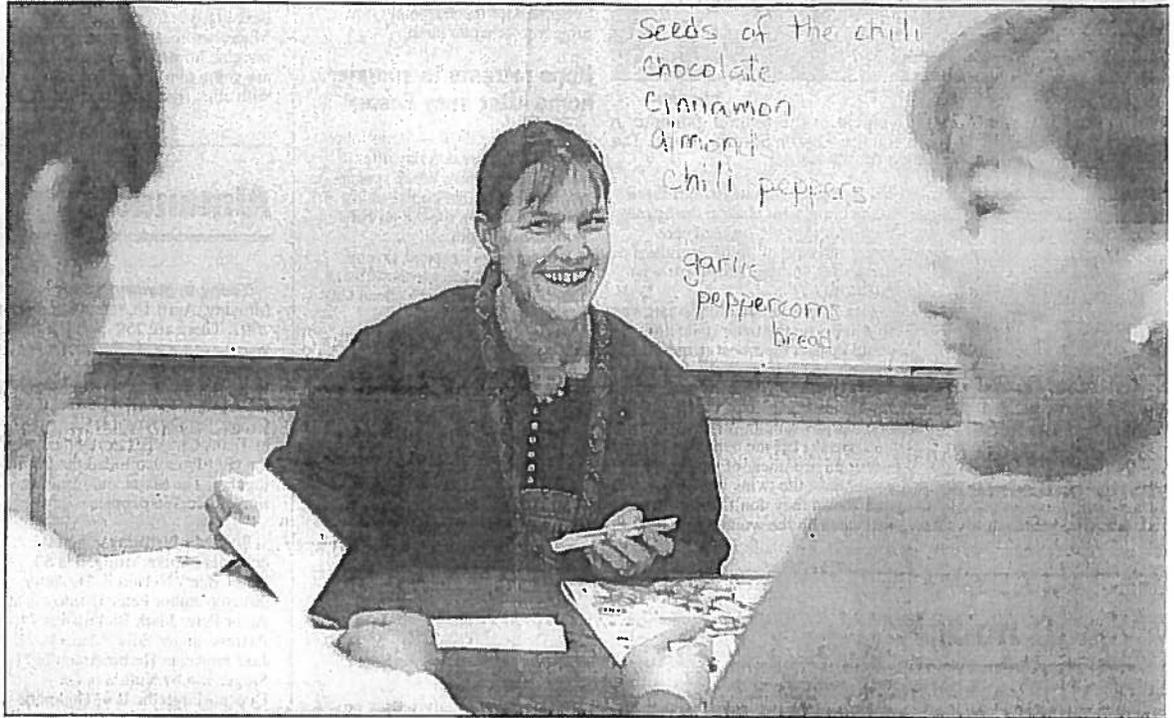
If they're well-behaved, little ones can play quietly at a pint-sized table and chairs, while their parents translate shopping lists into terms such as *broccoli* or *French bread*.

A tutor guides lessons at each table. Flash cards, newspaper advertisements and plastic coins are tools for mastering the complexities of the English language.

Tedious grammar exercises and cumbersome vocabulary tests are



Daisy Aron (left) learns English from Klara Everson of La Conner Thursday.



Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley News

Korl Crane (center) teaches English Thursday in the Mount Vernon Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Station to Emmanuel Cruz (left) and Mi Hernández (right). Tutors from Skagit Literacy teach English as a second language and other basic education skills to adults at Kulshan Cr

absent from these language lessons. The students have jobs and families, leaving very little time for polishing their English skills.

Tutoring sessions are boiled down to what is necessary for getting by in a grocery store, a job interview or an emergency situation. Grammar comes along with time.

A place to learn

English as a second language is the most popular subject at Skagit County's seven adult learning centers, which have popped up since the Best PLACE program gave Skagit Literacy a big financial boost last year.

Skagit Literacy

originally started at Skagit Valley College before Skagit County Community Action Agency adopted it.

The nonprofit organization — which also administers services such as the Women, Infant and Children program, veteran's assistance and a homeless shelter — operates Skagit Literacy out of its office in Mount Vernon.

Major expansion started in September of 2000, as Skagit Literacy became the adult learning portion of Best PLACE, the distribution program for Skagit County's 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant. The \$20 million federal grant over three years is aimed at improving literacy rates.

Best PLACE's contribution of \$147,000 to the program set into motion a plan to scatter adult learning centers throughout the county.

Six staff members and 56 active

volunteers carry out tutoring sessions for about 120 adults who want to learn basic skills they didn't learn from formal schooling.

Program coordinator Bill Henkel said an estimated 24,000 and 28,000 Skagit County residents cannot read well enough to decipher job applications or share books with their children.

"If that's even close to true ... the problem is huge," Henkel said.

Sharpening skills

About 60 percent of the adults who visit Skagit Literacy learning centers seek help with English. Most have recently emigrated from Spanish-speaking countries and represent varied levels of English knowledge.

Some speak English well but lack solid reading skills. One student

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About the centers

■ Skagit Literacy has learning centers in Anacortes, Concrete, La Conner, Mount Vernon and Sedro-Woolley. A Burlington site is in the works.

Free tutoring is available to adults who want to prepare for the GED high school equivalency exam, learn English or work on other basic skills.

Volunteers are needed for all centers, especially those in Burlington, Mount Vernon and Sedro-Woolley. Tutors must commit two hours per week for six months. The next training session for tutors is set for Friday, June 8, and Saturday, June 9.

Anyone interested in becoming a tutor or a student may call the Skagit County Community Action Agency at 360-416-7585

Learning centers offer help with language skills

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holds a master's degree from Russia, and wanted to learn English to find a job in the United States.

Tutors try to meet every level of need. Victor Rodriguez attends the Kulshan Creek site to improve his English skills for work.

"I like to learn English because it's necessary," Rodriguez said during a tutoring session on Thursday.

He said the lessons have improved his English conversation skills, making it easier for him to talk to his co-workers at Draper Valley Farms.

Ultimately Rodriguez would like to know enough English to work with computers. He plans to take a computer class at the Goodwill.

Other learning center patrons seek basic education — learning multiplication tables to get a better job at a local casino or working toward a high school equivalency diploma.

Henkel estimates at least half of these students have some form of learning disability. Adult literacy staff members are not qualified to diagnose such disabilities, but they can identify certain learning strengths and weaknesses through a test when students register for tutoring.

Realizing potential

Crises usually prompt adults to seek help from the learning centers. Such life-changing events include anything from job loss, immigration or parents' realization that they can't read a book to their children.

"It's got to be something that really pushes them in our direction," Henkel said.

Learning center staff members and tutors strive to help students achieve two primary goals.

The first is to help them build skills that will strengthen their families. Adults often come to the centers because they want to keep up with the English language skills their children are learning in school.

Henkel said relationships in immigrant families often are strained when the children's education surpasses that of their parents.

"Their kids are becoming Americanized and they are not," Henkel said.

The second goal is to help adults realize their learning potential. Many learning center students had bad experiences in school as children and feel discouraged about education in general.

Henkel said adults who lack basic skills such as literacy are sometimes seen as a lost cause.

"We often think that they're beyond help," he said.

Henkel said volunteer coordinators try to combat that idea by matching students with personal tutors who will be able to connect with them and offer extra encouragement.

Offering time

Volunteering to teach a peer can be daunting.

But Henkel said learning center tutors soon find out they don't need specialized skills to help most students.

"Much of what our students need is someone who has patience with them," Henkel said.

A weekend training session gives tutors a crash course in how to teach adults. Then

"I like to learn English because it's necessary."

Student Victor Rodriguez

they are matched with students who share similar personality traits. Volunteer coordinators help these first-time teachers by recommending study guides and teaching strategies.

Some students stick with the program, while others leave. The tulip harvest has brought an influx of English language students into the learning centers. Henkel suspects many of these students, who work in local fields, will leave after the season is over. Staff members and volunteers find it difficult to see students leave after spending so much time together and making progress.

"Your heart's just out there all of the time," Henkel said.

Klara Everson, a volunteer coordinator who also runs the Kulshan Creek center, said most tutors volunteer because they are interested in teaching people and learning from them at the same time.

"Most people like to be involved in the Latino community," Everson said about volunteers at the Kulshan Creek site.

Everson finds her time as a tutor very rewarding.

"The best part is when people know enough English to make a joke," she said.

Keeping up over time

Henkel said he is unsure what Skagit Literacy will look like in a few years. The

biggest uncertainty is whether enough money will be available to support the learning centers.

Skagit County's 21st Century Learning Centers grant covers \$147,000 of the program's annual budget. The program receives about \$5,000 each year from the United Way, \$10,000 from the state and a small amount of private donations.

Because the federal grant money, distributed by county government, has made up the largest part of Skagit Literacy's budget, it is uncertain how the learning centers will fare when the three-year grant expires.

"Obviously we would like the Best PLACE grant to go on forever, but it won't," Henkel said.

Skagit Literacy is changing its programs to focus more on family literacy and helping adults with learning disabilities — issues that tend to attract public and private grant dollars.

"The kinds of things that we're moving towards are the kinds of things there's funding for," Henkel said.

Henkel's goal is to better coordinate all of the county's literacy services, creating programs that target entire families instead of fragmenting education into age groups.

Paying little to no rent for the learning centers and using volunteer labor means the learning centers potentially could sustain themselves, Henkel said. But they will have to wait and see.

While the centers continue to thrive on the riches of the Best PLACE program, coordinators and tutors plan to do the best they can to meet students' needs.

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